

CASE STUDY: THE LOS ANGELES SYNDROME: A PRESCRIPTION FOR THE REST OF US?

Two of the main themes associated with the “smart growth” movement are high-density development and investment in transit rather than new road capacity. Ironically, Los Angeles is the highest density metropolitan area in the country with the lowest number of freeway miles per person of any U.S. city. At the same time, it has the worst traffic congestion and the poorest air quality in the country. High-density development and inadequate road capacity have not worked for Los Angeles.

CASE STUDY: THE LOS ANGELES SYNDROME: A PRESCRIPTION FOR THE REST OF US?

Background

Los Angeles, the nation's most populous metropolitan area, has a variety of cultural, educational, and economic opportunities that continue to attract thousands of new residents each year. Yet Los Angeles, where the average driver wastes more than 82 hours each year sitting in traffic, also ranks first in the nation for traffic congestion (Texas Transportation Institute 1999) and air pollution (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 1998). The Sierra Club (1998) describes Los Angeles as "the granddaddy of sprawl" and says that it is the "standard for the worst that sprawl has to offer."

Arguing that the city is too spread out and too dependent on highways, anti-growth activists often cite L.A.'s congestion and air quality problems as evidence that higher-density, more compact urban development and less emphasis on highways will produce less traffic congestion, cleaner air, and a more livable community. But will it?

The Myth

Los Angeles is a sprawling area served extensively by freeways. Los Angeles's traffic congestion and air quality problems are largely the result of the extensive freeway system and sprawling development.

The Facts

Los Angeles is a high-density metropolitan area that has invested heavily in the development of a rail transit system rather than adding highway capacity to address its traffic congestion problems.

- At 5,500 people per square mile, Los Angeles is the highest density metropolitan area in the country, according to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA 1997).

- The population density of Los Angeles is more than one-third greater than the New York-Northern New Jersey metropolitan area, which has 4,100 people per square mile.
- The population density of Los Angeles is relatively uniformly distributed. Unlike New York, which has a very high density in Manhattan surrounded by low-density suburbs, Los Angeles has a relatively low-density downtown but relatively high densities throughout the rest of its metropolitan areas.
- At 52 miles per million people, Los Angeles has the lowest number of miles of freeway per capita of any U.S. city, according to the FHWA. By comparison, the national average is 114 freeway miles per million people. Due to inadequate road capacity, the average driver in Los Angeles wastes more than 82 hours each year sitting in traffic, according to TTI (1999).



- Los Angeles has spent billions of dollars building a rail transit system. With much lower than projected ridership and cost overruns in the millions of dollars, support for the system has virtually evaporated.

Our Position

Anti-growth activists argue that the best way to avoid the air quality and traffic congestion problems of Los Angeles is to restrict road mileage and increase urban density. However, Los Angeles is one of the highest-density metropolitan areas in the United States, and it has the lowest number of freeway miles per person. Los Angeles also has the poorest air quality and worst traffic congestion in the nation. High-density development and inadequate road capacity have not worked for Los Angeles.

Localities should adopt a balanced, comprehensive approach to planning that recognizes the need for both low- and high-density development and for additional road capacity, as well as transit and other options to address congestion.

Endnotes

Federal Highway Administration. (1997). *Highway Statistics 1997*. Washington, D.C.

Sierra Club. (1998). *The Dark Side of the American Dream: The Costs and Consequences of Suburban Sprawl*. <www.sierraclub.org>.

Texas Transportation Institute. (1999). *Urban Roadway Congestion Annual Report 1999*. College Station, TX: Texas A & M University.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (1997), *National Air Quality and Emissions Report*, 1997, Washington, D.C